

## User fees finance refuge services

by Pam Ables



*Raptor visits during the Refuge's open house are partially funded by a book from the visitor center via the Alaska Natural History Association.*

Camping, boating, fishing, hunting, hiking, skiing, school field trips, etc... Public lands offer innumerable opportunities for all. I believe that no refuge in Alaska except the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge offers so much for so little. Have you ever wondered what happens to the 10 bucks that you pay each night you stay at Hidden Lake campground? Or what happens to the \$14.95 you pay for a book at the Visitor's Center?

Unlike the tax dollars we all pay, the fees collected for refuge services take a refreshingly short path through government red tape. We have three types of collections on the Kenai Refuge: a bookstore, campground fee collection, and administrative fees for guide permits. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell

you about each type and what happens to the money once the refuge has collected it.

Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA): When you buy a book or item at the visitor center or visitor contact station near Jim's Landing, you actually buy from ANHA, a non-profit organization dedicated to the education and understanding of Alaska's public landowners. There are many ANHA outlets throughout the state at other refuges, national forests and parks, state parks, and other visitor centers. Money spent at the ANHA bookstores has been helping the Refuge provide educational services and materials for more than 20 years.

The refuge newspaper *Refuge Reflections* printed with ANHA funding, serves as an excellent resource for visitors and new staff to learn about the refuge's recreational opportunities. ANHA also supports environmental education training for local teachers and helps to fund refuge environmental education programs during the fall months when refuge funds are in short supply at the end of the fiscal year. Have you joined us at the Refuge Open House in the fall? If so, you have probably seen our raptor visitors from the Anchorage Bird Treatment and Learning Center (TLC). ANHA funds the raptor visits and also helps the refuge to show our appreciation to the community by providing some of the food that is prepared and served by the staff.

Campground Fees and Golden Age Passports: Ten dollars at Hidden Lake per night! Ten dollars for a Golden Age passport for Senior Citizens to select campgrounds and other federally-funded facilities? What happens to the money that goes into staying at one of those fancy California-style campgrounds out on Skilak Lake Road?

The Kenai Refuge received money to build these beautiful campgrounds, but what about money to maintain them? Prior to 1999 the Kenai Refuge used 70% of the fee money to maintain the campgrounds; the other 30% went into a black hole called "overhead." Now the Refuge System is able to use the Fee Demo Program, which is available to other federal agencies that provide similar visitor services. This program returns 100% of collected fees directly to the Kenai

Refuge. This money comes to us as “no-year money,” which means it doesn’t go away at the end of the fiscal year (September 30); the money carries over for refuge campground maintenance and improvements in subsequent years. For example, in 1999, we collected \$30,328 in campground fees from our two fee campgrounds. This money was used for trash pickup, outhouse pumping, campground patrol, campground hosting, and maintenance in the summer of 2000. In 2000, we collected \$29,409, which will be added to the 1999 remaining balance for 2001 maintenance.

Permit Administrative Fees/Client Use Fees: “Administrative fee” sounds much like “overhead” to me, but this money really does have a functional destination. When guides apply for permits, they pay a \$100.00 administrative fee as well as a fee for each day they have a client in the field. These fees come to the refuge through the Recreation Fee Program. We get 70% of this “no-year” money. It is used to maintain guide permit information, hunting/fishing patrol, Law Enforcement issues, and maintenance. In years past all guides had to pay \$100 a year for their permits. In 1998 we issued the first 5-year permits charging the same administrative fee as the 1-year guides. This change accomplished four things:

1) It decreased the amount of administrative time spent on each permit, thus requiring less money to maintain a permit.

2) Guides who consistently fail to meet the requirements of the permit or receive a violation now pay four times more than the guides who are out there working hard to run a quality business.

3) It rewards guides who diligently submit all the documentation required to operate on the refuge.

4) Lastly, it provides incentive for guides to meet the requirements of the permit and the law. Qualifying for a 5-year permit saves a guide \$400 over the life of the permit.

So, drop by the campgrounds on Skilak Lake for a couple of days or stop by Refuge Headquarters for information before taking that hike. It’s yours...bought and paid for.

*Pamela Ables has worked for the Refuge System since 1986. She is a IT Specialist and also supervises the administration of refuge funding each year. She lives in Kenai with her husband, Myke, and his daughter, Destiny. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*